

1.933

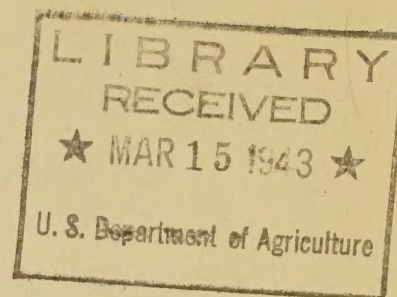
Su3

cop. 2

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
U.S. RURAL ELECTRIFICATION ADMINISTRATION

1.933

Su3



✓
SUGGESTIONS AS AN AID TO BETTER CORRESPONDENCE

NOTE: This material was originally prepared in June, 1937 by Vincent D. Nicholson for a brief course of study by certain members of REA.

Revised: September 21, 1942.

USDA
LIB

RECEIVED BY THE DIRECTOR
OF THE BUREAU OF REVENUE
WASHINGTON, D. C.

RECEIVED BY THE DIRECTOR
OF THE BUREAU OF REVENUE
WASHINGTON, D. C.

RECEIVED BY THE DIRECTOR
OF THE BUREAU OF REVENUE
WASHINGTON, D. C.

~~386083~~
TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION -----	1
I. GENERAL APPROACH AND PREPARATION OF THE WRITER	
1. A thorough knowledge of the subject equipping the writer with the necessary facts and produc- ing an essential feeling of ease and assurance -----	3
2. A clear concept of the purpose of the letter and the result desired from the reader -----	5
3. A visualization of the reader - his background, knowl- edge of the subject, self-interest and attitudes ---	7
4. An adequate outline of the letter, either in one's mind or on paper -----	8
II. CERTAIN PRINCIPLES TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE COM- POSITION OF A LETTER.	
5. General tone and style -----	9
6. Qualities of tact, courtesy, and sincerity -----	13
7. General structure -----	15
8. The importance of the opening and ending -----	18
III. FOUR REQUISITES OF A GOOD LETTER.	
9. Good diction -----	20
10. Conciseness of expression -----	23
11. Clarity of thought -----	25
12. Completeness in the letter as a whole and in each of its component parts -----	27

INTRODUCTION

The matter of effective correspondence is one of great importance to the organization and to each of us personally. Facility in letter writing brings many satisfactions that run beyond the primary purpose of increased business utility. A good business letter is a work of art, and its utility depends upon its artistic quality. Few can be great artists but all of us can improve our product by conscious effort. Effective expression is no guarantee of business success, but few persons have succeeded in business administration without the ability to say effectively what they know.

The subject of this study is of special importance to REA because of the volume and character of our correspondence. Few government agencies of comparable size have such a heavy load of letter writing. The several thousand officers and employees of our 800 borrowers constitute, in one very real sense, a field organization of the Rural Electrification Program. In dealing with borrowers and the many other interests, public and private, that are involved in the program, REA is much more than a government lending agency. Its supervisory and advisory functions comprise the whole range of problems incident to a \$400,000,000 enterprise in the electric utility field. The problems are multiplied and accentuated by the novelty of co-operative operation of such enterprises. Our correspondence is affected, both in volume and in character, by the fact that our borrowers, although "partners" with us in the program are private, independent entities and must be dealt with as such.

Some of our problems are unique. We are engaged in an enterprise that is unprecedented in the history of Government and that is wholly new in the business experience of many of the people with whom we deal. Each State presents widely different problems of policy and public relations. Certain letters are much more important than others but every communication, however, simple or standardized, has a public relations aspect. A social program like ours, faced with powerful opposition in many quarters, needs the most favorable public opinion that is possible. A high standard of correspondence (often woefully lacking in government agencies) will contribute to this end. The following simple suggestions are intended to present, in organized form, certain principles and techniques which all of us know in a vague way but too often fail to put into practice.

GENERAL APPROACH AND PREPARATION OF THE WRITER

1. A THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECT

The first requisite in writing a good letter is a thorough knowledge of the subject. It is hopeless to expect any adequate response from the reader if the writer's understanding is confused or incomplete.

There is a temptation to write letters prematurely because we like to get things off our desks. Before one begins to write a letter or memorandum he should know all about the subject that is necessary for the purpose of disposing of the matter. It may mean getting information from other people or it may mean a more critical examination of one's own files.

Next, I suggest that we be more diligent in organizing the facts and analyzing the problem. Obtaining a broad perspective of the letter or the memorandum saves time in the long run. It is impossible to write a good letter on a complicated subject without taking a good deal of time. Most of this time should be taken before beginning to dictate. There is difference of opinion as to a general practice of hastily prepared rough drafts. It is my experience that this practice should be kept to a minimum of highly important letters, in order to save time and to avoid habits of carelessness and laziness.

An adequate knowledge of the subject has another result that is more intangible but more valuable. Creative achievement in any field requires a release of spirit that comes only from a sense of ease and assurance. This assurance is impossible unless one feels a mastery of the subject. A person who seems dull and inarticulate in a group may become vivid and articulate if the discussion turns to a subject with which he is intimately familiar.

In every field of art, achievement comes by way of the intuitive processes which draw subconsciously upon an accumulated body of experience. This spontaneity and release of spirit is possible only when one feels thoroughly at home in the work at hand. Nothing so dries up the wells of creative effort as a sense of inadequacy. When I feel mastery of a subject I produce a memorandum, or a letter, or a brief of which I am not ashamed. My thoughts flow freely and the document develops as it should. When I try to dictate something with inadequate preparation I am defeated from the start. I feel a constant sense of inadequacy and I lack that release of mind and feeling which is essential to creative work. If I were asked to evaluate the requisites of a good letter or memorandum, I would place at the head of the list a thorough and organized knowledge of the subject matter.

2. A CLEAR CONCEPT OF THE PURPOSE OF THE LETTER

Every letter or memorandum has a purpose. It may be the spurious purpose of getting the matter off one's desk or off one's chest. It may be a desire to display the erudition of the writer or to release pent-up emotion. The valid purpose, however - that for which we are employed - is to produce in the mind of the reader a certain feeling or to evoke from the reader a certain action.

Some REA letters are very simple; other are highly technical; still others are complicated by delicate problems of public relations. The letter may convey information; it may request information; it may make suggestions; it may give instructions; it may attempt to clear misunderstandings; it may seek to persuade or convince. Whatever the subject matter, there is a central, controlling purpose in every letter. As a result of our effort we want something to happen at the other end. It may be a very simple thing or it may be a complicated series of things. The thing that we want to happen may involve chiefly the psychology of the reader or may involve a series of acts, not only on his part but on the part of his associates. The purpose of the letter is to be of maximum assistance in causing that thing, or that series of things, to happen.

The usual difficulty is not in arriving at a proper conscious purpose; we know that we desire a particular course of action from the particular reader. It is a possible subconscious purpose that needs to be watched.

The most difficult letters are those which involve differences of opinion between the writer and the reader. The problem is one of convincing the man at the other end, not in obtaining a certain release of spirit in

holding up my end of the question. He may emphasize issues which I deem unimportant or irrelevant but I must meet him in the avenue of his thought before I can hope to bring his mind to my position. It happens too often that an answering letter, even though admirable in structure and style, fails to be a real answer, because it does not go out to meet the reader. We may feel that the reader is wandering far afield in error and ignorance, but we must go to him where he is. Shouting at him from a distance to come over to the writer's position is not likely to be effective.

3. VISUALIZING THE READER

A determination of the essential purpose of a letter leads to the next step in the writer's preparation--a visualization of the reader. The technique of the "you attitude" has become a truism in business correspondence. Our correspondents vary widely in a number of respects--in education, in knowledge of the REA program generally, in special knowledge of the particular matter and in their interests and attitudes. Some of our readers are sympathetic to our program generally; some are highly critical. Some are deeply interested in the particular subject at hand; some are indifferent. The matter of visualizing the person at the other end involves taking into account all of these factors. A letter on the same subject might need to be written in four different ways to four different persons. It is difficult but it is possible to place one's self in the mental and emotional shoes of the reader. This principle of the "you attitude" is a thread that runs through every aspect of effective correspondence. Each REA letter should be a "selling" letter. Merchandising houses spend huge sums in the development of effective sales letters. We have something to sell, the idea of cooperating with us in an important and colorful social program.

4. AN OUTLINE OF THE LETTER

The last step in preparation for the act of writing is the making of an outline of the subject matter. In most cases this will be a mental outline only. For long and complicated writings it is helpful to make an outline on paper. Anyone who has not had a long experience in dictation will probably find it helpful to map out in advance the framework of any important letter of a page or more. Even those of us who have had wide experience in dictating for hours at a time make too little use of the simple device of a short written outline for highly important letters.

Such an outline, properly constructed, has several functions. In the first place it centers attention upon the need for one central idea and helps to avoid the inclusion of several unrelated subjects in one letter. A further function is to arrange in logical sequence the several parts of this central idea. The outline of a long and complicated letter might have three or four main divisions and a number of subdivisions. Some letters are ruined, even though excellently expressed in language, because the sequence of ideas is wrong and the letter does not proceed smoothly from one thought to another.

Finally, a clear understanding - either in mind or on paper - of the general framework of a letter, enables the writer during dictation to focus attention upon the language used in filling out this framework. Good dictation requires a certain spontaneity that is hampered if one's thought is preoccupied with the different mental task of organizing the ideas to be expressed. I venture to predict (based upon my own recent experiments) that anyone will find an easy and surprising improvement in the expression of ideas if the formulation and arrangement of the ideas for the entire letter has been carefully completed prior to dictation.

II

CERTAIN PRINCIPLES TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE COMPOSITION OF A LETTER

5. GENERAL TONE AND STYLE

Every letter has a general tone which should harmonize with its purpose and help to promote the response desired from the reader. A letter may be persuasive or coercive, friendly or antagonistic, conciliatory or controversial, dispassionate or over-earnest, forceful or weak. It may have life and warmth or it may be cold and dull. The qualities of tact, courtesy and sincerity may be evident in varying degrees.

The importance of "tone" varies with the purpose of the letter and with its importance. A large number of REA letters are merely informative. Many others carry simple instructions to interested and willing readers. Such letters have a light load to carry. They should be well-written and conform to the principles previously discussed; they should do credit to the writers and to REA. But they do not require much attention to the matter of tone.

We are concerned here with the relatively few letters which have a heavy assignment. It may be necessary to convert indifference into active interest. Doors stronger than indifference - irritation or antagonism - may bar effective entry to the reader's mind and feeling. Even with a friendly, interested reader, it may be desired to change a strongly held opinion. There may be the difficult task of saying "no" and yet making the reader like it, or dislike it as little as possible.

The controlling purpose of such a letter may be a change in the reader's feeling; it may be an immediate act or a succession of acts. A single letter may involve both feeling and action with equal emphasis. In determining the proper tone of a "feeling" letter--one intended chiefly to

change an attitude--the matter of visualizing the reader is of major importance. Transpose one's self into his situation; seek a sympathetic understanding of his problem. Try to feel, for the time, as he feels. Imagine the type of letter which the writer would consider effective, were the situation reversed. Estimate the strength of the reader's emotional resistance and determine not only the tone which should dominate the letter but also the degree of tone emphasis which is just enough--not too much, or too little. The appropriate tone may be argumentative, persuasive, conciliatory, forceful in language, firm in adherence to a given policy, unusually earnest or carefully dispassionate. "Tone emphasis" does not mean an emphatic letter; it means the degree of tone feeling which is appropriate and necessary to carry the particular load. The reader should not feel that the tone is overdone, but on the other hand an important letter should not be timid or feeble in its approach.

An "action" letter - one which seeks important action from the reader or his associates - should carry a feeling of action. The ideas should be "on the march". Words and phrases should be positive rather than negative. By a little special attention, most negative ideas can be transposed into a positive form of expression. Instead of saying "It will be unacceptable to us and disadvantageous to you to employ an inexperienced lawyer or engineer or manager", say instead "It will greatly expedite your project and will save money as well as time, to employ persons who are specially competent and experienced."

The most important requirement of a successful letter, designed to secure action from the reader, is an effective appeal to the reader's self-interest. The reader must be shown how he will profit by the action desired.

The writer should marshal in his thinking, before beginning to write, all the features of his central idea which contribute reasonably to the self-interest of the reader. In sending these ideas upon their mission it is usually good tactics to avoid a direct frontal attack; a flank movement may avoid the subconscious resistance which is always raised against an invasion of one's ego. So far as possible, the reader should be made to feel that it is his own idea which evokes the response. Leave much to the reader's imagination; do not attempt to tell the whole story. Suggestion is often more effective than a completely developed argument.

Style is a more appropriate expression than tone for certain attributes of an effective letter. The style of a letter might be described as its architecture; the tone is its atmosphere. Without overstraining the distinction, it might be said that the architecture of a business letter should employ simple lines. There should not be much adornment, either in ideology or in diction. Figurative language (which has its place, perhaps, in this discussion of business correspondence) should seldom appear in the correspondence itself.

Although the choice of appropriate styles in REA correspondence is limited, there is room for discriminating variety, depending upon the subject matter and the reader. Some letters should have formal dignity; others should have something of a conversational style. The personal relation between the writer and the reader should not be emphasized as a general rule, but there are letters in which such emphasis is appropriate. Some letters should be a solid block of technical instruction; some should be a closely knit body of argument. Others may be helped by a few light touches to relieve formality and rigidity.

Both in style and in tone all parts of a letter should have an essential harmony. It is usually better - certainly, easier, - to preserve the same style and tone throughout. If conciliation and sharp criticism are used in a single letter, they should be skilfully blended. Light personal touches should not be thrown in without regard for the principles of good architecture. A compliment, an expression of congratulation or an appreciative reference to a personal association should be blended into the context and not be allowed to stand out as an obvious and awkward attempt to curry favor.

6. QUALITIES OF TACT, COURTESY AND SINCERITY

There are certain qualities which should characterize every letter, regardless of the subject-matter or the tone. There are occasions when a letter must be sharply critical of an attitude or course of action of the reader. Vigor and firmness may be more appropriate than conciliation or deference. Every letter, however, should be written with tact. This matter of tact does not lend itself easily to a formulation of rules. We are always conscious of the presence or absence of tact on the part of those with whom we deal; we may not know just how or why. The Golden Rule is perhaps the best one; the writer should frame the kind of letter which he would like to receive. In this part of our discussion we are concerned, of course, with the spirit of the letter - not with its content. The idea may be highly unwelcome, but the manner of its expression should diminish rather than increase the emotional resistance of the reader. The writer should first put in order the house of his own emotions. No letter should be written in anger or irritation. A business letter seldom requires fervor, but proper earnestness can be achieved in dispassionate expression. Sarcasm or irritation is occasionally evident in incoming REA correspondence; the impulse to reply in similar vein is strong, but to yield to the impulse is to descend to the correspondent's ineffective method. He has accomplished nothing with me except to make me less spontaneous and ready in any attempt to give him what he wants. My reply should depend upon the results which I wish to accomplish with him. If he and his interest are a closed chapter and of no further use to REA, it is better to ignore his letter rather than allow it to get me into bad correspondence habits. If, as is usually the case, we want something further from him, my letter should pave the way for a renewal of

effective cooperation. There is no loss of self-respect for me personally or for REA if my attitude of tact is ultimately successful in dominating the relationship.

Courtesy is also an indispensable requisite. The reader's personality should be respected. If I were asked to reduce this somewhat elusive quality of courtesy to a single didactic rule, I would say that it is a matter of sympathetic and interested understanding of the reader's position and problem. Some of us are instinctively interested in other people; some of us require more conscious attention to the reaction of our own attitude in the feeling of others. "Smile and a man smiles back". In terms of sheer business utility, the success of a letter may be in direct proportion to the courtesy of its tone.

Sincerity is essential in carrying conviction to the reader. If the feeling of courtesy is forced or mechanical, the reaction upon the reader will be negative. The "you attitude" in a letter is not essentially a matter of syntax or mechanical forms of expression. The letter must ring true to the quality of sincerity and this is possible only when the writer's interest in the reader and his problems is honest. Such an honest interest is often difficult. One's first impulse in meeting a tough situation - particularly in answering a complaint or expressing criticism of a reader's conduct - is a release of one's own emotional tension. But that is not what we are employed to do. Our business duty is to obtain a result from the reader that will further the interests of REA. It is not necessary for the writer to apply an anaesthetic to the natural desire to dominate; it is possible to sublimate this desire into a higher level of dealing and a more effective choice of methods.

7. GENERAL STRUCTURE

The proper structure of a letter involves, chiefly, matters of syntax and rhetoric which are beyond the scope of this study. I shall refer merely to a few simple rules which might be kept in the focus of one's attention during the preparation of a letter.

Each letter should have one central idea. If it is necessary, during a single period of dictation, to address one person on several unrelated subjects, each subject, however unimportant, should be handled in a separate letter. In important matters, this practice is essential for the sake of an effective letter. In unimportant matters it is desirable for the sake of proper filing and future reference.

The paragraph structure should correspond with the logical breaks in the thought. We have already discussed the value of an initial outline (often in written form) breaking up the central idea into its component parts and arranging these parts in logical sequence. Each paragraph should be a unit in itself and should develop one of these principal parts of the central idea of the letter. A paragraph should present a solid block of thought in which the several sentences are fitted together nicely. If a necessary sentence does not fit and sticks out awkwardly, it belongs in another paragraph. Variety in the length of paragraphs is proper but the degree of effective variation is not so great as is true of sentence structure. Unusual length and unusual shortness of paragraphs should be avoided. Good paragraph structure requires not only the exclusion of irrelevant matter, but also the inclusion in each paragraph of all that is necessary to complete its special task.

The thought should proceed smoothly from one sentence to another and from each paragraph to the succeeding one. Do not ask the reader to wander around in a labyrinth, not knowing exactly where he is being led. It is essential, not only that the ideas should be arranged in logical sequence, but also that this sequence should be followed easily by the reader. Each paragraph and each sentence should be tied in with the preceding one. Sometimes the thought flows so smoothly that no mechanical connecting devices are necessary. Most of us, however, should make much more frequent use of connecting words that bridge the gaps between sentences and paragraphs. Such words as the following are of great assistance to the reader: "however", "further", "furthermore", "nevertheless", "moreover", "therefore", "also", "same", "thus", "such", "similarly", "on the other hand", "another", "besides", "the following", "the foregoing". Some connecting words are appropriate only in letters involving technical subject-matter, and formal style; others are particularly adapted to a free and easy style. The adjective pronouns, "this", "that", "these" and "those" are usually preferable to more formal expressions such as "above", "foregoing", "above-mentioned", "hereinbefore designated". Instead of the phrase "the above designated project", so generally used in REA correspondence, the simple phrase, "this project" or "your project" would be more appropriate in most letters. A good letter should be a smooth, straight and well-bridged highway, carrying the reader's thought with ease.

The first and last sentences of a paragraph are of special importance. The opening sentence should introduce the central idea in such manner as to give the reader an immediate understanding of what to expect from the paragraph as a whole. Most persons are visual-minded and the extent to which

the writer's thought is transferred to the mind of the reader is often dependent upon the mechanical arrangement of the ideas. The sole purpose of paragraph structure is to break up the thought as a mechanical aid to the reader. This purpose is partially defeated if the reader is kept in uncertainty through half of a paragraph as to its controlling idea. The last sentence should end on a strong note. Paragraphs are too often permitted to fizzle out weakly. Every important letter should have a few highlights in order to quicken and sustain the reader's interest. This special emphasis is usually most effective when applied at the breaks in the thought, represented by the transition from one paragraph to another. Each new paragraph places upon the reader the burden of assimilating a new idea and this burden is assumed more readily when the close of the preceding paragraph has stimulated the reader's imagination and interest.

8. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OPENING AND ENDING OF A LETTER

What has been said concerning the opening and ending of a paragraph applies with even more force to the letter as a whole. Special attention should be given to the opening paragraph and particularly to the opening sentence. Remember that this is the introduction of your idea to the reader. First impressions are lasting and important. A predisposition is created by the introductory words. If this is favorable to the writer's purpose, the task of the remainder of the letter is more easy.

The first sentence should be active; should get ahead with the subject. It is weak and ineffective to begin with statements such as these: "Your letter of _____ received," "I wish to acknowledge your letter of _____." Do not use most of the opening sentence to give a condensed recital of the letter that is being answered. This is dead material, it carries the thought backward instead of forward. The opening paragraph should, of course, identify the letter that is being answered but sometimes this can better be done in the second sentence.

When the letter has the difficult task of overcoming indifference, irritation or opposition, the opening sentence requires unusual care. It should make definite progress in getting beyond the outer ramparts of the reader's resistance. It should go along with the reader's thought and feeling. It should contain a statement which at the best will create pleasure, and at the worst will avoid a sense of displeasure. It should arouse interest and evoke agreement. In answering a complaint, never use the word "complaint" or its equivalent. Avoid all provocative, controversial words and phrases.

In letters which seek important action the strategy of an appeal to the reader's self-interest should usually begin with the opening sentence.

This appeal is the key-note of an effective letter. Until this key-note is struck the mind of the reader is not likely to fall into marching line with the mind of the writer. Until this happens the letter merely marks time and the important opening paragraph should not be so wasted.

The last paragraph and the last sentence also merit special attention. The letter should end on a strong note. The last paragraph should be more than a tag-end. It should emphasize the central idea of the letter and should contain specific reference to the chief result desired from the reader. It may introduce a new idea and be the last step in the development of the thought, or it may be a short, forceful summary.

Remember that the last sentence is your last contact with the reader prior to the result which you desire from him. If action is desired, end with a note of action. It is sometimes effective to be quite specific as to the first step which you wish him to take immediately. Participial endings are particularly bad. Do not let the force of your letter fizzle out by such expressions as: "Awaiting your reply", "Regretting that we are forced to take this action", "Thanking you in advance for the information requested".

It is impracticable to give studious care to each sentence in a letter. It is highly worth while, however, to give special attention to the opening and the ending. Each should please the reader, appeal to his self-interest, and make a carefully planned contribution to the central purpose of the letter.

III

FOUR REQUISITES OF A GOOD LETTER

9. GOOD DICTION

Words are the raw materials of a letter. The larger one's store of these materials, the greater one's facility in constructing an excellent product. Everyone has three vocabularies which might be represented by three concentric circles of different sizes. The largest circle is one's reading vocabulary, which has little significance for our present purpose.

Very much smaller is the circle which includes all the words which one can conveniently use in writing or speaking, by means of reasonable care and deliberation. An enlargement of this circle must come chiefly from a wide reading of good literature. Of the more than 400,000 words in a standard unabridged dictionary, the estimates of the number of words used in writing and speaking by persons of average college education or its equivalent, range from 10,000 to 20,000.

The smallest circle is one's usual working vocabulary. Our problem is concerned chiefly with this third circle, and particularly with the segment of that circle which represents our REA correspondence. Some experts have estimated that 2,000 words make up the vocabulary usually employed in business correspondence.

The first task in the improvement of diction is not so much an enlargement of one's total writing vocabulary, as an increase in the ease and facility with which one uses his presently available vocabulary. It is partly a matter of the time consumed in searching for the right word. With long, painstaking deliberation each of us could greatly improve the richness of the word material we choose for our letters. Such great length of time is impracticable.

The following practical techniques are suggested as well worth the time and effort:

(a) Just as every letter has a central idea and a number of component key ideas, so every letter has a few key words which must carry the main stream of thought. It is probable that these words justify more discriminating thought than most of us give to them. Take reasonable time to consider the precise shade of meaning one desires to convey and select from a number of synonyms the word which most aptly fits this meaning.

(b) Read over at convenient times, the copies of one's own letters. Pick out the words that could be improved upon; words that fail to convey the precise shade of intended meaning; important words that are stilted or colorless. Rewrite, merely for practice, a poor letter - or portions of it - using words that have more richness and better adaptation to the thought.

(c) Select from one's past correspondence important words which occur with too much frequency, even though they may be adequate otherwise. Take a dictionary - or better, a book of synonyms - and write out a few other choices. Use this list from time to time by way of checking past correspondence and sometimes during actual dictation. The practice will not only enrich one's vocabulary generally but will help to correct the very bad fault of too much repetition or particular words or phrases in a given letter.

(d) Take an hour from time to time to read over the letters of others - particularly letters within the field of one's own correspondence, written by persons with more than average facility. Note the important words and phrases that differ from one's own customary use.

Improvement in diction does not mean the choice of unusual words. It may mean the elimination of words that may impress the reader as a "play to

the grandstand". Simple words of common usage offer ample choice in variety and richness. The need for simplicity should be kept in mind particularly in the large number of our letters addressed to non-technical persons of average, or less than average, education. Simplicity, however, does not require dullness or colorless commonplace. Important words should carry a drive toward the feeling or action desired from the reader.

The reader must constantly be kept in mind. The choice of important key words and phrases involves not only an adaptation of the word to the thought of the writer, but also a reproduction of the thought in the mind of the reader. In addition to their precise meaning, words have overtones. The connotation of a word may vary with different readers, depending upon their education, interest and attitude. A highly technical word that would be an appropriate entry to the thought of a lawyer or engineer, might fail of its purpose with a farmer.

10. CONCISENESS OF EXPRESSION

A good business letter should contain the fewest possible ideas necessary to carry the central thought and the fewest possible words necessary to express these ideas. There are types of writing in which great elaboration is appropriate. A business letter should have literary merit but it is not written primarily as a contribution to good literature. It is concerned with a single subject of limited range, and usually is intended solely to evoke some immediate action by the reader.

The principle of conciseness applies to the entire letter, to each paragraph and to each sentence. All parts of the letter should be related to the central idea. Some REA letters that I have seen are a jumble of unrelated ideas. Ideas that are irrelevant to the main thought and purpose of the letter should be eliminated. It may be necessary to write two or more letters to the same person at a given period of dictation.

Having reduced the essential ideas to the smallest feasible number, the next task is the expression of these ideas in proper sentence structure. The first requisite of a proper sentence is good grammar. The second and less rigid requisite is the effective grouping of words in accord with certain principles of rhetoric. The general rules of rhetoric are, of course, beyond the scope of this study, which is concerned only with a few practical matters to which a group of busy people can give more conscious attention in their work. One of these matters is the simple problem of conciseness.

Brevity of sentences is of great importance in business correspondence. One of the most frequent faults in REA letters is a great mass of verbiage that buries the idea. Conciseness, however, is not just a matter of few words; it is also a matter of fitting the words together neatly like

the parts of a well-oiled machine. Brevity, of course, can be carried to an extreme. A letter should not be a succession of abrupt jerks. It is good rhetoric to mix together sentences of differing lengths.

In sentence structure, as in the choice of words, the writer should always keep working on the mind of the reader; the words should be arranged for him. It is possible to place too much emphasis upon rules and principles. Good writing, like any other artistic expression, must be spontaneous. Conciseness should not be bought at the price of rigidity and stilted form. A sentence has two aspects: the dynamic, which is the idea to be expressed; and the static, which is the form of expression. If the writer has the right intuitive "feel" of his idea, the form of expression will usually take care of itself without much conscious thought of the principles of good sentence structure.

11. CLARITY OF THOUGHT

Clarity is closely related to conciseness but involves certain considerations that require separate treatment. A short, concise letter or sentence is not always clear.

Clarity in the letter as a whole requires a proper relation of all the paragraphs and all the sentences so that the thought proceeds smoothly. A clear letter must start at one point and proceed as directly as possible to the closing point. The intermediate points should be upon a direct line of march. Detours of thought should be avoided. A good, clear letter should be something like a map directing a friend how to arrive at one's home; the important guides should stand out and not be confused by a mass of unnecessary detail.

Clarity in a sentence is the right word and phrase in the right place. Too often it would seem that modifying clauses are thrown into a sentence without any regard as to where they land. The central idea should stand out so prominently that it is easily apprehended by the reader. A second reading should not be necessary.

The best guarantee of clarity of expression is clarity of thought in the mind of the writer. If the writer knows clearly what idea he wants to convey in the letter as a whole and in each sentence, the more mechanical task of expression will be accomplished without heavy effort. A confused sentence is usually a true reproduction of confused thought. Thorough knowledge of the subject at hand and careful organization of the writer's ideas before beginning to dictate will get every letter off to a good running start. Here again it should be emphasized that the letter must be clear to the reader - not merely clear to the writer - and the particular reader must be

kept constantly in mind with each sentence. This requirement need not be a time-consuming burden; after adequate practice and conscious attention it will become an intuitive habit.

12. COMPLETENESS

In answering an incoming letter, cover every essential matter that is in it. If consideration of certain matters must be postponed in whole or in part or must be referred to others, these facts should be explained. The same requirement of completeness applies to letters that originate with the writer. The central idea should be adequately covered so that no avoidable question marks arise in the mind of the reader. The main issue and each subordinate issue should be met squarely. The letter should not wander off at a tangent. If it is necessary to withhold information or postpone a decision, special care should be taken to prevent or minimize any impression of evasion.

One should make final disposition, so far as possible, of every matter included in the letter. The letter should get things ahead just as far as possible. The reader should not have to write back for further instructions or information that could have been included in the prior letter. An analysis of certain REA correspondence shows that weeks of delay have been occasioned by incomplete letters. When a difficult problem is presented on a busy day it is tempting to temporize and to get rid of the matter for the time being by an inadequate handling. In the long run it will save time to do everything necessary for complete disposal of the matter when it is first presented. This may mean obtaining further facts, consulting with others, or grappling a tough problem with an extra effort of mind and will.

Completeness is not only a problem of the whole letter, it is a problem of each paragraph and each sentence. Clear up everything as you go. Leave no loose ends to plague the reader and later to plague the writer or some other person in REA.

